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Railroading in the Fifties

The decade of the 1850's was one of unparalleled railroad construction in the United States. In 1850 there were 8,588 miles of track in operation built at a cost of \$296,260,128. Ten years later, in 1860, fully 30,598 miles of track had been laid costing \$1,134,452,909. The significance of this vast increase was apparent to most Americans.

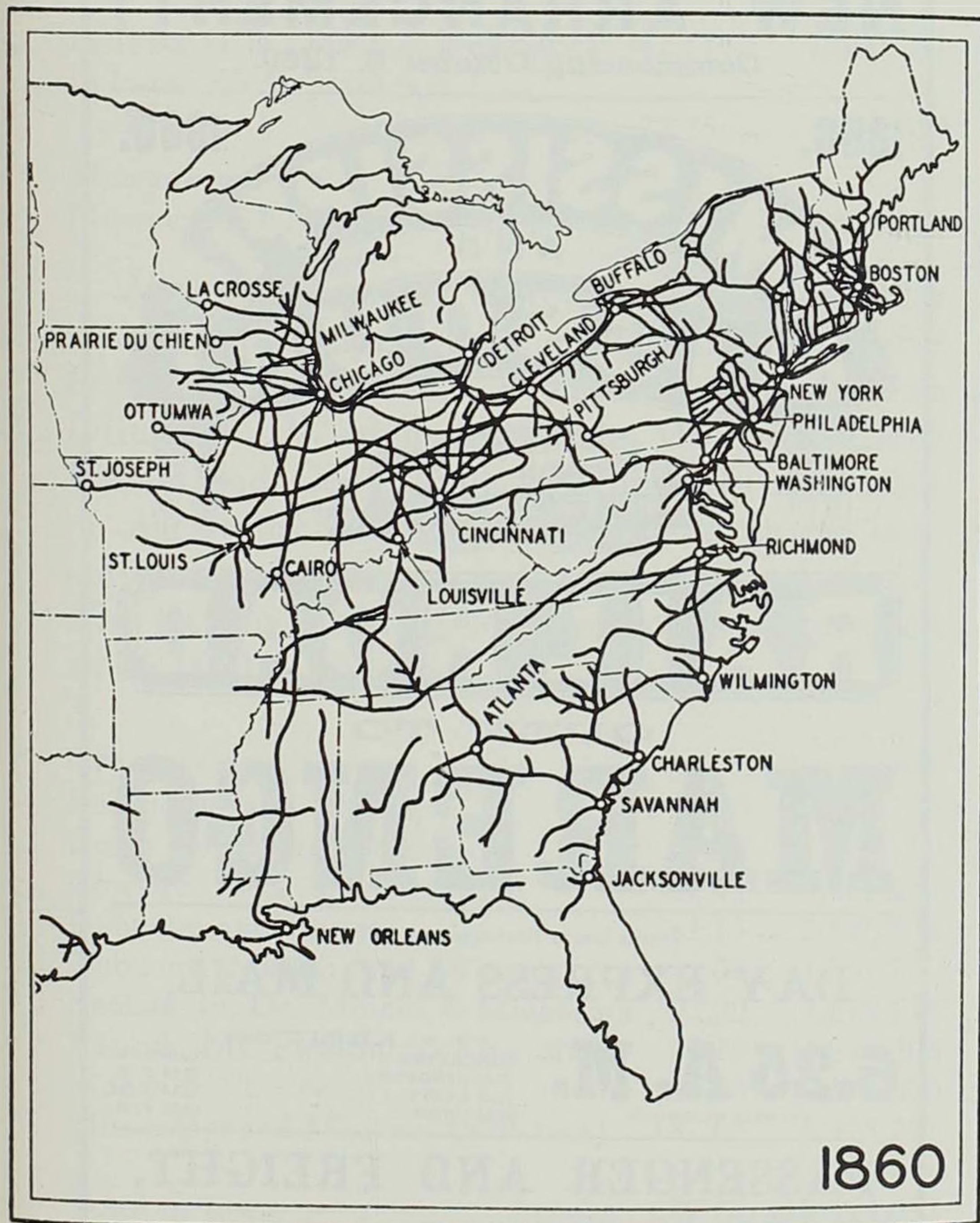
The Census of 1860 reported railroads had played a relatively unimportant rôle in the internal commerce of the United States prior to 1850.

Nearly all the lines then in operation were local or isolated works, and neither in extent nor design had begun to be formed into that vast and connected system which, like a web, now covers every portion of our wide domain, enabling each work to contribute to the traffic and value of all, and supplying means of locomotion and a market, almost at his own door, for nearly every citizen of the United States.

The Census of 1860 further revealed that nine Mississippi River towns had been linked directly with the Atlantic by rail. Of these nine towns, five were in Iowa — McGregor, Dubuque, Clinton, Davenport, and Burlington. LaCrosse, Wis-

consin, was united with Milwaukee and Chicago by rail, while Hannibal and St. Louis in Missouri were bracketed with the eastern seaboard. Only one point below St. Louis — bustling Memphis — had a direct connection with the Atlantic by rail. New Orleans depended on a circuitous connection with the Atlantic through the Illinois Central to Chicago, or by way of any railroads that tapped such towns as Memphis or St. Louis with the Atlantic. It took unremitting toil and fabulous fortunes to lay the foundations of such a mighty railroad empire. The Census of 1860 recorded the amount expended by five giant railroads of today as they forged westward to the Mississippi and into Iowa, laying their tracks at a staggering cost.

RAILROAD	MILEAGE	COST OF CONSTRUCTION
<i>Rock Island</i>		
In Illinois	181.50	\$ 6,913,554
In Iowa (Mississippi & Missouri)	187.63	6,318,721
<i>Burlington</i>		
In Illinois	138.00	7,468,926
In Iowa (Burlington & Missouri)	93.30	2,492,758
<i>Illinois Central</i>		
In Illinois	738.25	27,195,391
In Iowa (Dubuque & Pacific)	111.18	2,836,833
<i>North Western</i>		
In Illinois (Galena & Chi. Union)	261.25	9,352,481



RAILWAYS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1860.

Note how Pacific-bound railways in the United States converged on Iowa by 1860.

its two sister states to the east, graphically demonstrates the tremendous westward thrust of the railroads in the wake of the vast hosts of settlers who caused Iowa's population to expand from 192,214 to 674,913 in the decade ending in 1860. The predominance of the northern routes and the fact that over half of the direct railroad connections linked the Atlantic with the Mississippi opposite Iowa was destined to play an important part in the impending Civil War.

Railroad building during the last half of the nineteenth century was a glorious adventure and no period was more thrilling than the Fabulous Fifties when men of wealth, vision, courage, and resourcefulness raced their iron horses westward to the Mississippi and laid the groundwork for the speedy conquest of the rich prairies of Iowa.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN